



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

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For IR Public Health column

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Farmer's Market: Public Health Will See You There!

If you want to celebrate the health of our community, scurry on down to Farmer's Market.

Every week, you can enrich your diet by loading up on fresh and locally grown fruits and vegetables. You can enhance your physical activity, whether by walking briskly among the vendors or joining the zumba dancers in a jazzy step or two.

Chances are you'll bump into friends, co-workers, and relatives while you're there. Part of being healthy lies in having a good social support system, and Farmer's Market is a wonderful place for an impromptu tete-a-tete with people who care about you.

All this isn't lost on the public health staff here at the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department. Many of us make the market a regular part of our weekends. But we also spend time at the market in a more official capacity.

Our sanitarians are there to help make sure the goodies you indulge in are prepared and sold with food safety in mind.

Our WIC nutrition program staff are there to encourage the use of WIC benefits to buy that fresh, local produce.

WIC Benefits

WIC is a nutrition program aimed at improving the diets of pregnant women, new moms, and children up to age 5 who meet the income guidelines. Participants get benefits to buy certain foods to supplement their diets. This helps them get the nutrients they need during critical times of growth and development.

The Helena WIC program participates in the federal Farm Direct Program, administered by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. Through Farm Direct, WIC clients can use some of their benefits to buy locally grown fruits and vegetables from approved local farmers.

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is to protect and improve the health of all county residents.*

Ultimately, the goal is to reduce some of the barriers to a healthy diet that many low-income families face.

To make all that yummy produce as readily available as possible, WIC staff will be at the Farmer's Market on Fuller Avenue every Saturday morning until the benefits are gone, probably about mid-July. You'll find them at the EBT (electronic benefit transfer) table. Stop by to get your benefits or to learn more!

To get the fruit and vegetable benefits, you must first qualify to participate in WIC. To do so, visit our office at 1930 Ninth Avenue or call 457-8912. More information about WIC is available at www.wic.mt.gov.

You can use the benefits at any booth with a sign saying the farmer accepts them. About half a dozen farmers have enrolled in the local Farm Direct Program so far. We invite other growers who are interested to contact WIC at the number above.

Food Safety

Ever wonder if it's safe to eat that raspberry jam or cinnamon roll you bought at the Farmer's Market?

By law, the local health department must inspect and license facilities that prepare, cook, or sell food to the public. This is to ensure that the food is safe for us to eat, that it's unlikely to cause a nasty foodborne illness.

The law makes an exception for food sold at farmer's markets. But that doesn't mean there's no oversight of the goodies you buy there.

To sell food at the market, vendors must apply to the health department for a Farmer's Market certificate that lists all the food items they plan to sell. Our sanitarians review the applications to make sure the vendors sell only specific types of food that are allowed under the exemption. They also work with vendors to provide guidance on safe food handling and packaging.

Because of the high potential for contamination, vendors cannot sell cooked, canned, or preserved fruits, vegetables, and grains. Nor can they sell baked goods made with ingredients that could support the rapid growth of bacteria, like egg custards and cream fillings.

Preserves must be hygienically processed, packaged, and sealed. Foods that include tomatoes, sauerkraut, pickles, or herbal vinegars or oils are not permitted unless prepared in a licensed commercial kitchen.

Vendors at our Farmer's Market must display their certificates at their booths. So, if you want to make sure the food item you're buying has been approved for sale, ask to see the certificate.

To learn more about Farmer's Market certificates, contact the Licensing and Inspection Program at the health department at 447-8361 or lrick@co.lewis-clark.mt.us.

See you at the Farmer's Market!

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Sidebar:

2012 Farmers Market Schedule

Saturday Market:

Downtown on Fuller Avenue

April 28 to Sept. 29

9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Thursday Market:

Mountain West Bank, 2021 N. Montana

July 19 to Sept. 27

4:30 to 6:30 p.m.

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